

# Restored OPERA HOUSE

*at the center of Ellendale's arts revival*



State Historical Society of North Dakota photo HP32-DI-41

The postcard at left shows the original opera house in the early 1900s. Above is an image Ken Schmierer created based on a photograph of the building today.

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The Ellendale opera house was once billed as the largest between Minneapolis and Seattle, but it's been about 80 years since sounds from the last opera and 30 years since the last theater production filled its auditorium. Thanks to the efforts of a local group, there are hopes to again bring the opera house back with live productions. But first, its auditorium will have to be filled with the beats of pounding hammers and rhythm of humming saws. Directing this restoration is the Organization of the People in Ellendale for the Restoration of the Arts, Inc., or O.P.E.R.A., Inc.

After O.P.E.R.A., Inc., bought it from the city for one dollar about six years ago, members began work on restoring the 99-year-old opera house. Since then, O.P.E.R.A., Inc., has put on a new roof and support beams, and rebuilt

a portion of the deteriorated and weathered back wall. The renovation has required a lot of work and funding, but Jeannette Robb-Ruenz of O.P.E.R.A., Inc., says the organization is prepared for it.

"We've come a long way in the last six years, and we have a long way to go," says Robb-Ruenz, "but we have a very determined organization and a good support system. In addition, we have both the State Historical Society and the National Trust for Preservation giving us support."

With Ellendale celebrating its 125th anniversary this summer, O.P.E.R.A., Inc., is now pushing ahead to renovate the building's lobby. The opera house makes up the second and third floors, and for several years, a bank of businesses made up the first. O.P.E.R.A., Inc., is working to turn one of those old businesses into a lobby and offices for the opera house. Once this project is completed, O.P.E.R.A., Inc., will then turn to restoring the auditorium.

Volunteers Grant Crabtree, at left, and Stewart Ruenz and Jeanette Robb-Ruenz work on the renovation of the interior of the opera house.



The auditorium has not been in working condition since Ellendale's performing arts group disbanded in the 1970s, but Robb-Ruenz hopes productions can be held in the auditorium once renovation is completed. With this larger, historical facility, she believes Ellendale will be able to revive the performing arts, and O.P.E.R.A., Inc., has already begun the revival.

O.P.E.R.A., Inc., founded the Dickey County Children's Performing Arts Company to generate support for the opera house's renovation. The Company has performed with the Missoula Children's Theatre, but if all goes right, it will perform its own production for the 125th celebration. In addition, O.P.E.R.A., Inc., has put on semi-annual dinner theaters in a local restaurant for the past four years. These have given Ellendale the foundation for re-establishing its performing arts, and with continued efforts, it will have the opera house for larger productions. The renovation of the lobby is just one more step in this direction, but its renovation will also be important for all arts in the community.

Just as the opera house was the center of the arts for Ellendale when it was first constructed in 1908, so it has become the center for an arts revival that began last May. That was when North Dakota State University's Center for Community Vitality held its "Building Community Vitality through Arts and Heritage" workshop in Ellendale. The workshop sought to bring economic growth through the arts, and through the newly created Arts Council, Ellendale has made more progress revitalizing arts in the community. The opera house has become this arts movement's center.

"The opera house is for all arts, not just performing arts," says Robb-Ruenz. "We're excited about this and I'm very much for preserving my home town and historic buildings. So why not try to bring the local artists in to help with that? We have several different media—not just theater, but photography, painting and stain glass."

One idea that stemmed from the workshop was to showcase local art, and since last summer Ellendale has featured a local artist each month by displaying his or her work in different historical buildings throughout town. The city's architectural history, crafts and arts will all come together when the opera house lobby will display all of these differ-

ent showcases during Ellendale's 125th celebration June 28 through July 1.

Among those showcases will be art that is now displayed in the nation's Capitol. Three area photographers, Lynette Durham, Lian Mowry and Ken Schmierer, currently have photographs on display in the Agraria Restaurant in Washington, D.C. This restaurant is owned and sourced by North Dakota family farmers, who also provide much of the food. After it opened last year, Ellendale Economic Development Director Patricia Bowen contacted the restaurant and asked if it was interested in displaying North Dakota arts and crafts as well.

Bowen is one of the driving forces behind Ellendale's arts and culture development and is currently working to get more recognition for the community's artists and crafters. She is now creating a local artist directory that will feature pictures and purchase information about the works by area artists and crafters.

"Ultimately, we're giving artists the opportunity to sell their art," says Bowen about the directory. "That way they can stay in Ellendale and still do what they love."

According to Bowen, Ellendale is one of many communities catching on to reviving their arts, not only for artistic benefits, but for the economic opportunities that are generated.

Jeff Langley, vice president of O.P.E.R.A., Inc., says Ellendale has already benefited from the arts. "Ellendale has become the arts and culture center for Dickey County," says Langley. "This has meant increased awareness for the arts and increased patrons within the city. Despite generating and enjoying the arts, it has become an economic development issue because it brings people to town. We get the benefits of the arts as well as the benefits of the economic activity."

Although many of its artistic successes have been spurred on by Ellendale's 125th Anniversary, residents are working to assure they continue for another 125 years. As the saying goes, it's not over until the fat lady sings, but the only place Ellendale expects that to happen is inside a refurbished opera house.

*The community of Ellendale has been the recipient of Arts in Education grants and Special Project grants from the North Dakota Council on the Arts. For more information about the North Dakota Council on the Arts and its programs that support communities across the state, call 701-328-7590, or visit its website at [www.nd.gov/arts](http://www.nd.gov/arts).*



This photo by Lynette Durham is one of many works by area artists on display at the opera house.